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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses some of the challenges facing libraries in the area of service to adults learning English as a Second Language. It describes services provided for this population by some libraries, and suggests tools and approaches that other libraries can use. It also outlines actions that participants at the 1991 White House Conference on Libraries and Information Service, as well as others, may follow. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (VWL)

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By ShellyQuezada
Consultant,Massachusetts Board
of Library Commissioners.

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July 1991
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National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education

The Role of Libraries in Providing Services to Adults Learning English

by Shelley Quezada,
Consultant, Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners

This digest discusses some of the challenges facing libraries in the area of service to adults learning English as a second language (ESL). It describes services provided for this population by some libraries, and suggests tools and approaches that other libraries can use. It also outlines actions that participants at the 1991 White House Conference on Libraries and Information Service, as well as others, may follow.

Libraries' Historical Role in Literacy Education

The history of libraries in the United States reflects active support for literacy, ESL instruction, and citizenship education. At the beginning of the twentieth century, libraries took on the role of social educator by providing library-sponsored ESL and adult literacy classes for large numbers of immigrants. As natural community centers, libraries are in a pivotal position to bring together newcomers to the United States and the general population to share traditions, discover more about one another, and celebrate the diversity of language and culture. Libraries feature lectures and concerts and include library materials for newcomers in their native languages.

Library Services for a Multicultural Population

New waves of immigrants and refugees, especially those who have arrived in the United States since the 1980's, present new challenges to libraries. This new population is straining the ability of communities to meet the ever increasing demand for instruction in ESL and survival skills. Therefore, libraries are called upon to help communities keep pace with the needs of new and underserved community members for whom English is not the primary language, at the same time that they continue to serve their long-time constituents.

Libraries have begun to identify key areas for collection of materials and program planning. However, while it is important to maintain collections of print and non-print materials in the languages other than English spoken in the community, the building of collections alone will not guarantee that new groups will use the library's resources.

Therefore, libraries are also establishing themselves as centers for literacy education. Some provide space and promotion for small group or one-on-one ESL instruction, often in cooperation with local literacy providers and volunteer organizations. The local library is also often a favorite field trip destination for ESL classes held at other sites.

Whether providing literacy instruction or promoting greater use of library materials, library programs and services must be grounded in a thorough understanding of issues that affect the specific needs of newcomer groups. For example, some adult education professionals are now exploring the concept of building biliteracy, or literacy in two languages, for individuals who lack basic literacy skills in their mother tongue as well as in English. (See Rivera 1990.) Differences in social class, religion, and educational background are additional factors that libraries are beginning to acknowledge and address in their materials collections and program planning.

To publicize new collections and services, libraries are encouraged to develop special programs and events that focus on cultural diversity and pride. The library can be a natural forum where community members, who might not otherwise have a chance to do so, can meet each other. Events such as bilingual storytelling, art or photographic exhibits, dance, or musical presentations in both English and other languages are more than ethnic celebrations. These events foster cross-cultural sharing and help educate all members of the community.

Lastly, library books and materials in English about diverse cultural groups increase awareness for both English-speaking members of the community and for the children of newcomers who may not speak or read their parents' language.

What Some Libraries are Doing

Across the country, successful library programs for limited English proficient adults are flourishing. The Reader Development Program (RDP) at the Free Library of Philadelphia identifies, reviews, and makes recommendations about adult basic education (ABE) and ESL materials. It distributes free materials to 240 ABE/ESL programs in the Philadelphia area. The RDP, using Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA) Title VI funds, has also published and distributed the *ESL Idea Book* (Lane, 1990), *ESL Curriculum Guide* (Batt, Furstenberg & Reitzes, 1988), and *ESL Bibliography* (Collins, 1989.)

The New Americans Project at the Queens Borough Public Library in Queens, New York features an active ESL program and an outstanding collection of Spanish language materials, a Spanish books-by-mail program, and ongoing events celebrating Hispanic music, literature, dance, and culture.

For the past six years, the Jones Library in Amherst, Massachusetts, has run an ESL tutoring program serving a community of immigrants from Cambodia. The library staff have recently set up a Citizenship Education Center to prepare newcomers for naturalization and have convinced the Immigration and Naturalization Service in Boston to travel two hours to Amherst to process green card applications for almost seventy Cambodian refugees. This kind of proactive support for the needs of the refugee community is redefining the concept of "basic library services."

In California, 52% of the state's school age population is American Indian, African-American, Hispanic, or

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Asian-American. A California State Library program called Partnerships for Change has provided funding for community-based needs assessments, the development of local coalitions, and the expansion of new collections reflecting the ethnic and multicultural diversity of the communities.

What Still Needs to Be Done

As libraries in California have responded to changes in ethnic diversity through a vigorous and targeted campaign, libraries across the country must also respond to the evolving needs of their communities. Libraries nationwide can do the following:

- Develop programs based on a realistic understanding of the community's needs through ongoing interaction with its members and constant restructuring and adjustment of the library's service plan.
- Develop ESL programs and services for newcomers to the United States in cooperation with community providers and build coalitions with those who serve these special populations.
- Educate staff about the cultural backgrounds of newcomers and develop outreach techniques to enhance staff interaction with these groups.
- Use bilingual library signs, application forms, brochures, and publicity to promote use and awareness of library collections and services.

Libraries should also recognize the ongoing changes within their communities and not restrict services to providing collections that validate only past cultural histories. For example, libraries can help to document the evolving tapestry of a community by sponsoring oral history projects that record the recollections of members of older immigrant groups as well as those of newcomers.

The Second White House Conference

The Second White House Conference on Library and Information Services is scheduled for July 1991, in Washington, D.C. The conference goal is to involve people from across the country in the process of improving library and information services. The conference has three themes — literacy, productivity, and democracy. The focus on literacy for full participation in a democratic society demonstrates a realization that our nation is being shaped by the demands of an increasingly multicultural society. The conference themes also show a growing recognition that new technologies have further widened the gap between those who can read and process information and those who cannot.

Conclusion

Libraries are the repository of our history and culture. The printed word is still the primary medium for maintaining a record of that history. The library's mission continues to be to support the rights of all people, including our most recent immigrants, to have free access to that collective body of information. It is therefore imperative to acknowledge the role of the library in both the attainment and maintenance of literacy. Libraries must remain responsive to all members of the community, not only to those who know about and use their services, but also to the many newcomers who may not yet understand the tradition of a free public library.

White House Conference participants can make a compelling argument for the value of the library in society as they address the issues of literacy, democracy, and the preservation of our heritage. White House Conference resolutions will shape library policy as we enter the next century. By maintaining the value of libraries as the cornerstone of free access to information, we continue to fulfill our cultural and historical mission. We affirm libraries as entrances for any individual to the literate community. We ensure each individual's freedom to pursue a lifetime of opportunity to make informed decisions, and in doing so, we expand our base of support for the library as a responsive and vital institution for every member of the community.

Selected Resources

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